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Leiden
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The Early and Middle Pleistocene archaeological record of Greece : current status and future prospects

Tourloukis, V.

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English Summary

In the debate about early dispersals of hominins and the first occupation of Europe, the Mediterranean Basin holds a central position, as it seems to have been occupied significantly earlier than areas of the northern latitudes. Together with other parts of south-eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans, Greece is inferred to have been among the core areas for the peopling of major parts of Eurasia, serving as a ‘refugium’ and source region for populations in regions where occupation was intermittent due to climatic deteriorations. Therefore, the consensus in the palaeoanthropological community is that Greece would have been inhabited during the Lower Palaeolithic, particularly considering that early humans were present in adjacent regions with similar landscapes (Italy, Turkey and Bulgaria). Yet, in marked contrast to the rich evidence from excavated sites of the circum-Mediterranean region, Lower Palaeolithic material in Greece is scarce; it mostly consists of surface finds that have been ‘dated’ on the basis of their inferred archaic morphology and/or usually inadequate stratigraphic correlations.

Structured along a geoarchaeological axis, this study explores the reasons behind this apparent ‘absence of evidence’ from Greece. As the ultimate goal is to contribute to our knowledge of the Pleistocene occupation history of Greece and of the Mediterranean area in general, the investigation follows a three-stepped approach: the first stage seeks to *identify* the current status of the record, the second stage sets forth to *explain* this status, while the final step aspires to *put in prospect* the future of Lower Palaeolithic research in Greece.

In evaluating the Greek evidence, a framework of reference is needed and this is provided in chapters two and three. Chapter two overviews the main aspects of the Lower Palaeolithic period and outlines the critical issues related to early human dispersals and the po-

tential role of Greece in this subject. Chapter three reviews the evidence from the best-studied sites of the circum-Mediterranean region, focusing on the geomorphological environments of the sites, the typo-technological ascription of the lithic material and the available dating assays. In turn, this appraisal sets the background against which the Greek data is later juxtaposed.

Chapter four offers a critical assessment of all sites, findspots and isolated artefacts from Greece, which have been attributed to the Lower Palaeolithic period. Here the emphasis is on the artefactual material, its depositional setting, any associated dating and the argumentation for an ascription to the Lower Palaeolithic. Special attention is given to the evidence from the provinces of Epirus and Thessaly, where the author carried out extensive fieldwork, while revisiting known sites to re-evaluate previous claims or in the framework of survey projects in which he participated. Results from those zoomed-in examinations include new finds from the site of Kokkinopilos, Epirus and a re-appraisal of its significance for elucidating the early Palaeolithic of Greece. The revisit of site FS 30 at Rodia in Thessaly raises some doubts on the contextual data with which the lithic material is associated; it also suggests, however, a higher age for the local outcrops of fluvial gravels, underlining the potential of the Thessalian landscape for yielding Early Pleistocene archaeological evidence. In chapter five, the results from fieldwork in Macedonia (Aliakmon Project) and Zakynthos (Zakynthos Archaeology Project) are assessed and it is shown that the scarcity or total lack of stratified material is mostly due to geological biases, rather than research-related issues.

Chapter six explores the Quaternary landscape evolution and the degree to which geomorphic processes influenced the preservation of the Greek early Pleis-

tocene archaeological record on the landscape-scale. The interrelationships between vegetation, lithology, soils, topography and land use are examined against the background of an intense tectonic activity and a markedly seasonal climate. A slope map of Greece is used as a morphological measure to assess archaeological potential for preservation and recovery as a function of surface stability. Assessments of the effects of landscape instability upon archaeological context and visibility are shown to find support from a hypothetical classification of the landscape according to a nine-unit land-surface model. Overall, these analyses explain why the Greek Lower Palaeolithic record is scanty and why artefacts are rarely found in buried deposits. Moreover, it is argued that the fragmented nature of both the geological and the archaeological record before around MIS 6 is not a coincidence: it reflects an eco-geomorphic system dynamic and unstable enough to have prevented adequate preservation of landforms and associated archaeological material before the last interglacial-glacial cycle.

A synthesis of the results is presented in chapter seven. Here it is emphasized that only a very small proportion of the Greek Lower Palaeolithic record survived to the present. Particularly, it is argued that the areas which would have constituted ideal habitats for hominins and places with a great potential for high-quality preservation are now submerged by the sea. A conceptual geoarchaeological model is elaborated to explain the current status of the Greek record in comparison to the records from the Iberian and Italian peninsulas. According to this model, well-preserved and archaeologically visible Lower Palaeolithic sites occur in basin settings, which retained their role as 'sediment receivers' for most of the Early and Middle Pleistocene and were inverted into positive topographic features ('sediment producers') during the Late Pleistocene. The key explanatory factor is the timing of uplift and the duration and intensity of erosion accompanying the inversion of basins. In contrast to Iberia and Italy, an 'advantageous timing of uplift' (*i.e.* in the Late Pleistocene) was rather exceptional for the lowlands of Greece; most basins were affected by uplift already in the Early and Middle Pleistocene. Finally, the most promising locations for future Lower Palaeolithic investigations in Greece are suggested. The need for further research in the Aegean region is highlighted, whereas atten-

tion is drawn to mainland depressions with high prospects for yielding Early and Middle Pleistocene archaeological material, such as the basins of Megalopolis and Mygdonia.

This study shows that the poor record of the Lower Palaeolithic of Greece should be interpreted as the result of the biasing and destructive effects of Quaternary geomorphic processes and not as an indication of a former absence of hominins. Arguably, similar investigations are required before interpreting extant distribution patterns of early human presence, at least as regards areas of tectonically active settings and intense landscape dynamics.